

A Crisis of Monumental Size

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[0 : 00] I want to turn now to that psalm we were singing and that we read earlier on, Psalm 130 in the Book of Psalms, page 623. I'd like us to read it from the beginning of the psalm.

We'll see how far we get into the psalm, but I want us to concentrate on what I believe to be the center, on the root of the psalm, the middle of it, in verse 3 and 4.

We'll read from the beginning again. Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. O Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy.

If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness that you may be feared.

One of the most distressing experiences in life is when you have no control over what's happening around you. This can happen in all kinds of ways. Like when your car hits ice and goes into a spin, and when you turn the wheel one way and nothing happens, it keeps on going in the same direction.

[1 : 33] Sometimes people feel this when they're in hospital and they're going to be operated on. They feel their whole life is given into the hands of someone else, and one of the distressing experiences is not being able to have any control.

We like to always exercise control over everything in our lives. Or when you're on a mountain, if you're a hill walker, and all of a sudden a cloud comes over, a rain cloud comes over, and you find yourself in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of darkness, you don't know which way to turn, you become completely disoriented, you lose the path, and your life suddenly becomes extremely precarious.

Or when you're in a ship, and you lose sight of land, you have no navigation equipment, or in a boat, I should have said a boat, because most ships these days, of course, have got navigation equipment.

When you're in a boat, you lose sight of land, you don't know where you are, you don't know where you're going, and all of a sudden a storm comes, and you are in danger. You feel your life is completely out of control.

It's strange how in these circumstances, these are the times in which we often think about God. We might even pray to God when things get out of control, even those who never pray otherwise.

[2 : 54] Now you might read those words at the beginning of this psalm, Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. And you might imagine that this person is in just such a place, perhaps someone in the Old Testament, in a war surrounded by enemies, and he discovers that the army of the enemy is more than the army which accompanies him.

Too numerous for him. Perhaps it's someone sick on a bed, and with an incurable disease, or someone adrift out on the ocean like we were talking about.

No clue as to where he is, and in a horrific storm that's about to take his life. We can imagine all kinds of scenarios that there may be in which those words were written.

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. O Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy.

And that's why it might surprise you to know that there's not a scrap of evidence that the person who wrote this psalm was in such a situation.

[4 : 05] In fact, it could be that his life was never better. It could be. These words may well have been written by the richest, the most successful man in all the world.

And yet, now, all his success, in all the riches that he once gloried in and wallowed in, he now finds himself in the deepest crisis in his life.

The worst trouble that he's ever faced in all his life. And it's quite obvious from the psalm that the crisis is not an outward one. It's an inward one.

It had nothing to do with anyone else. It wasn't his enemies. He doesn't mention his enemies at all. It was simply this, that he had become aware of where he stood before God.

Let me put it another way. He had become aware somehow or other, slowly or quickly, we don't know, but he had become acutely aware of what we call his own sinfulness.

[5 : 24] Now, if at the same time, and it could be that his life was in danger, if he was in a storm, or if he was in a war, it wasn't the thought of dying that terrified him.

It was the thought of having to face God because he knew that God was going to hold him to account. And furthermore, he knew that God knew of every sin that he had ever committed in this life.

Or, it could be that the man was a rich and an easy going and a successful man, no danger, no conflict, no war, no sickness.

There's nothing in the psalm to tell us what his outward circumstances were. So it could be, as I said, he could have been in danger. But it could also be that he was in the middle of the most successful period in his whole life.

and yet, it may surprise you to know that despite whatever success or riches or glory he might have been enjoying on the outside, the crisis was exactly the same.

[6 : 47] Because he would, at the same time, know that all his achievements and his success and all his intelligence could do nothing to save him from the judgment of God and from his own sin.

Now this awareness that he was a sinner, this awareness of how great and how awful and how horrific his sin was could have arisen in a number of ways.

God uses all kinds of different things to make people aware and conscious of where they stand before him. Could have been the death of a friend.

He could have come near to death in an accident or in a war. There are all kinds of ways in which God brings us sometimes to the brink of life and death itself to within a hair's breadth of leaving this world and it's amazing how that can make us think differently of who we are and what we are and most importantly who we are in relation to God.

And what's more, the psalmist, the person who wrote this psalm has become aware, perhaps as he never was before, he's become aware of God as he really is.

[8 : 17] Not just as he would like to imagine him to be, not the God of his own making, the kind of God that we hear so many people talking about today, a God that they create for themselves, but when you're brought to the brink of life and death, you begin to think of God as he really is.

Isn't that the case? And I think that perhaps there are people here tonight, and you know what I'm talking about, you know that you've been brought there yourself. So, as he comes to realize not only his own guilt and his own sinfulness, and as he comes to realize of who God really and truly is, he makes this remarkable statement, a statement which is absolutely vital for anyone who really truly understands who God is.

You know, there are many things we could think of this evening that we could think of when it comes to the knowledge of God. We could think of his power, we could think of even what the Bible says about the creation.

We could think of what it must be to know all things and to be immutable and to be eternal without beginning and without end. These facts defy our wildest imagination, don't they?

We could spend hours talking and philosophizing and discussing all about these things, the knowledge and the power and the inscrutability of God. we could think of all these things, the greatness of God and none of these creates a crisis whatsoever and that's why so many people tonight are so content to sit around the fire or to sit around the dinner table talking about all of these things because it doesn't really affect them.

[10:09] but what really truly affects us and sends us into the deepest crisis that you and I will ever face in this world is this fact.

Read it with me. Verse 3 If you, O Lord, should mark iniquity, O Lord, who could stand?

That's what it comes down to, isn't it? That's the bottom line because whatever kind of ideas that you might have about other aspects of God, it's when we think about the way God sees and knows and judges our own wrongdoing that we come face to face with the personal God with whom we have to give an account.

And all of a sudden, this man sees sin, first of all, for what it is, for what it really is. He stops seeing sin in other people, wrongdoing in other people.

How much time have you wasted in your life when you talk about wrongdoing? You look at it in other people, you read the newspapers, you talk about how terrible governments are, how unjust governments are.

[11:31] You look at Burma this evening, you think, if only I can't understand this awful government in Burma, why they don't allow aid to get to those millions of suffering people, how wicked can you get?

And always when we think of wrongdoing, we think of national wrongdoing, or governmental wrongdoing, wrongdoing in society, and what governments allow, and how bad the world is, and how, but when you come to this fact in verse 3, all of these things are shelved for the time being, because you all of a sudden realize that sin is not something in other people, sin begins in me, and what I really have to work out is how I cope and how I deal with the sin in myself.

besides so many people think, if you're going to go down that road and just only think of wrongdoing as it takes place in governments and in injustice and all of these things, and I'm not saying these things aren't real, then you fall into the trap that so many people have of believing that our great purpose in the world is to make the world a better place.

It sounds so plausible, doesn't it? And you get people who think, well, if only we could make the world a better place. And they write songs about making the world a better place.

And they even try and suggest that the big problem, the big barrier between what we are as a world full of wrongdoing and what the world could be is religion itself.

[13:04] Listen to the famous words of John Lennon, imagine there's no heaven. It's easy if you try, no hell below us, above us only sky.

Imagine all the people living for today. Imagine there's no countries, it isn't hard to do, nothing to kill or die for, and no religion too. Imagine all the people living life in peace.

That was his dream. It's quite strange in how much conflict there was in his own personal life and how his conflict varied an awful lot from what he wrote about in his songs.

The fact is, it doesn't work. it doesn't work until you begin to see what this man saw because the truth is that for this man who wrote these words, he had gone way past all of that.

Perhaps there was even a day when he used to argue relentlessly about why God allowed evil in the world just like so many people do. I'm not saying it's not a good question.

[14:08] Of course, it's a perfectly valid question. But so many people, they use it just as a distraction to keep them away from this very truth. If you, O Lord, should mark iniquity, Lord, who could stand?

Perhaps this man had spent his whole life believing in himself. Maybe someone who lived day to day, never giving God a moment's thought in his life and in his heart.

Never giving a moment's thought to where he stood before the Lord. He might even have been a religious man. It's perfectly possible that this man had spent all his life as a religious man, probably a Jew in the Old Testament.

And as such, he would put his faith in himself as a faithful and a devout and a respectable person. And now all his religion has come to nothing.

Perhaps he was someone who was a multitasker. You know that there are people who pride themselves in being able to do ten jobs at the one time, priding himself in his ability to do more than one thing.

[15:19] And now all of these things, all of these priorities and dreams and ambitions, all of the things that he prided himself, all of these things have been put to one side. And now there's only one thing that he is thinking about.

Beforehand, no problem was too big for him to resolve. He had the intelligence, he had the control, the know-how. There is now a crisis of monumental size and he can't see past it.

And it's a crisis he can do absolutely nothing about. He is no longer in control of his own life. Out of the depths, I cry to you, O Lord.

God. And the problem is simply this, his own sin. He's not admitting that there are things in his life that shouldn't be there.

He's not saying, oh well, my life has never been perfect. I know that my life could be better. I know that I should try a little bit harder.

[16:31] he is saying this that perhaps for the first time in his life, he sees sin for what it really is, a massive separation between him and God and he has never known God and he never will know God, whilst this massive barrier is there.

The barrier is his own sinfulness and his own guilt. And that's the first thing he sees as he writes these words down.

The second thing he sees is God's immovable and perfect justice. justice. That's the second thing. God's first of all sees sin as it really is and that is this immovable barrier before God that separates him and God and that's what it is.

But the second thing that he sees is God's immovable and perfect justice. Because he goes on to say this, if you O Lord should mark iniquity.

Now what does it mean for God to mark iniquity? Well let me just give an example of that. I think we all probably know what it means. But just let's try and open it out a little bit.

[18:08] What does it mean for God to mark iniquity? Thousands of teenagers, I know this in my own home, thousands of teenagers this week are sitting their hires and their standards, this month I should say, sitting their hires and their standards.

And hopefully in two months time, there's no question, I shouldn't say hopefully, that will happen. But in two months time the results will be sent out. In my day the results were sent out by post and up until very recently they were sent out by post so you always knew that a certain date in August you would go to the door and there would be the brown envelope having been put through the letter box.

You could always tell that A4 size brown envelope on the floor. You always knew what it was. Because very few people other, I mean nobody wrote to me as a 17 year old in any case, but especially in a brown envelope there had to be only one thing and it was the marks and thousands of teenagers will be.

But of course nowadays it's not, very few of them are sent out by post. they find out their marks by texting nowadays. You get them on their mobile phones and email and all kinds of things like that.

Well, that's great. And the mark tells us how well you have known your subject and how well you have passed or otherwise the exam.

[19:43] So if you did really well you get an A in higher. If you did not so well you get a B. If you did not so well you get a C. And if you failed, well it's beyond a C. So that's the kind of gradation system that we have.

I wonder, and I believe this is what the psalmist is saying, what if God who examines the way we live, not just on the outside, but on the inside as well, what kind of grade would God give me?

I don't need to wonder that at all. I know. And here is where the great difference lies between the way we think of ourselves, the way we like to think of ourselves, and the way that God declares that he thinks about us.

It's here in black and white. You see, we think of ourselves in comparison with other people, and we think of ourselves in terms of the difference between what I try to do and what I fail to do, and I know that there are things I should be doing that I'm not doing.

I know there's things that I'm doing that I shouldn't be doing, and I know that I fail from time to time and lose my temper, and I know that I have bad habits, and we think of wrong doing in this respect.

[21:05] So we give ourselves maybe a B. isn't that the case this evening? If you were to ask yourself this evening, what mark would you give yourself right now for what you really are?

You'd look at yourself and you say, well, I'm not involved in knife crime. I can think of people I dislike, but not that I hate.

I'm not involved in a fight. It's a long time since I'm conscious of doing something wrong. Perhaps you may have stolen something way back in the past, but you've been really trying, and you've been trying to mature, and you've been trying to move on past that, and to apply yourself, and to live towards other things, better things.

That's the way we think of ourselves. We don't like to think of what we've done in the past, or what we are at the moment, but we like to think of ourselves in terms of what we'd like to be, or what we aspire to be, and so if you're going to give yourself a mark, you'd probably give yourself a B.

You wouldn't give yourself an A, because you know that you don't deserve an A, but you probably wouldn't give yourself a C either, so you probably opt for something in the middle. I think that most people like to think they're average, and that's the way they like to think of how they live their lives, morally, and before God, and perhaps even if you think of God, well that makes you feel a wee bit uncomfortable because he knows more than other people, and he can see into more than other people can.

[22:34] The fact is, tonight, I have bad news for you, and I can say this because it's my bad news as well. I know what the envelope, I wouldn't even need to open the envelope, because I know what it would say, he would say, Ivor Martin, fail!

And it didn't matter, there's no reasons, there's no second chance, and there's no mistake, sometimes you can appeal. Sometimes you think, well I should have got an A when I got a B, I don't deserve this.

There's no appeal because there's no committee that's marking, there's no second opinion. You have to take what God says as the absolute standard and the absolute judgment of God.

We spoke about this last week. It's perhaps not surprising that we should come to a related topic. In fact, the whole Bible is this. Perhaps you're saying to me tonight, why are you always talking about judgment?

Because the Bible, it tells me that God is my judge. That is the greatest truth in all the world. Somebody asked a famous person once, I can't remember who it was, what's the greatest thought you've ever had.

[23:42] And he said, my accountability to God. The fact is that we're so busy with other things, we're so distracted with other things, we don't give it a moment's thought, but that is the greatest thought that you could ever think of.

Because it's the truth. It's the reality of life that one day we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God. I know that this sounds like classic preaching.

It's the truth. That's the important thing. Because it will happen one day. Otherwise, there is no God.

You don't need to worry about God if God isn't there, but if he is there, he is our judge. And if there's no God, I cannot account for life as I know it.

Life is inexplicable. It doesn't make sense to me if there's no God. And besides, God has come into the world. This person of Jesus Christ, he's upset everything, hasn't he?

[24:48] He really has upset everything. Our notions of how we can better ourselves by ourselves and our attempts to try and shove God out of the picture.

You can't do that if you really are going to take this person of Jesus Christ seriously. He really is such a nuisance, isn't he? I'll tell you why. Because he did things that are inexplicable.

And he did them in front of people, in public. And most of all, he rose from the dead. His grave is empty. The angel said, he is not here.

Come, see the place where he lay. That's the biggest nuisance in the world to anybody who's trying to live their life without God. God. It's the greatest fly in the ointment you can think of.

Because here is this one single individual in history that flies in the face of everything that I want as a sinful human being.

[25:46] And when I want to push God out of the picture, there's only one problem and that's this Jesus Christ. I can't get away from him. You can't get away from him because he lived in history and because he rose from the dead on the third day.

And that proves everything. Every single thing about what he was and what he said and what he did. And tonight, that's why I'm a Christian. Because of the resurrection from the dead.

And that's why I believe, I believe with all my heart that one day we will all have to stand before the judgment seat of God and there's only one way in which we can be saved from his anger.

We saw this last week. And that is by trusting and believing in the Jesus who died and rose again. So here we have the first step in that process.

And that is to come face to face with this awful fact, Lord, if you should mark iniquity, who could stand?

[26 : 48] And the man who walked tall at one point in his life up until this moment in time and proud and confident is now reduced to a helpless, pathetic cry.

Out of the depths, I cry to you, O Lord. He knows his life has come to the brink of despair. He can't do a thing about it. He's only wanting one thing.

Perhaps he was the kind of person who knew what he wanted and knew that nothing was outside of his reach. You know, that's what they tell you. Nothing is outside of your reach. You just have the ambition and the determination to get it.

Maybe he was like that one time in his life. Maybe you're a young person and maybe that's what your hopes and your dreams are. You're going to leave school. You're going to try and get what you can this month and you're going to try and use it as a springboard to get success for yourself so that with the right kind of determination, the right kind of drive forward, you can achieve.

And you know, that's largely true. But you know, the Bible, when we sit and open our Bible and when we realize what God is telling us, all of these things have to be put to the one side so that we get this one thing right and this one thing is my accountability to God and the fact that we're answerable to God and God is our judge and will hold us one day to our account.

[28 : 12] And once God makes that known to us, and I pray tonight that he's making this known to someone here, I believe he is. That's why we're here tonight. Because somehow or other, I don't know what your background is.

I don't know what's brought you here. I don't know what you've experienced. Maybe even the last few days. But all of a sudden, maybe your life has changed. Maybe the things that made sense to you before don't make sense anymore.

Maybe the things you lived for before, you don't live for them anymore because you've been made to see that there's only one thing that really counts in this life and that's God. Great.

That's the best thing you could ever discover. Best thing that you could ever discover. So his conclusion, if all we read in verse three, imagine the psalm stopped at verse three.

Lord, if you should mark iniquities, who could stand? Imagine there, he's brought to the very brink of despair and hopelessness. All he can see is his own guilt.

[29 : 12] But we thank God that this psalm is a story. That's why when we're singing the psalms, we should, if possible, try to sing all the way through, at least some of them, because sometimes we pick and choose.

You know, there's nothing worse than picking and choosing psalms without knowing why they were written and what context they were written. For example, if you're a feel-good Christian, you know there's such things as feel-good Christians who come to church and they want to read only the nice bits in the Bible.

If you're a feel-good Christian tonight, all you're interested in is verse seven and eight, the end of the psalm. Let's think about the happy things in this psalm, the things that will give us a lift and send us out strong into the world.

But that's to deny the psalm what it really means. The psalm's a story. I remember when I was a student going to a congregation once to preach, and in the vestry beforehand I said to them, there was all these elders around me, I was feeling very vulnerable amongst all these elders, and one of the psalms I wanted to sing was Psalm 130, but I only had half of it there.

One elder said, you've got to be joking. He said, you have to be kidding. I said, sorry, I'm not with you. He said, you've got to be joking. We're not really going to sing half of Psalm 130.

[30:19] You can't sing half of 130. You can't sing half of it. Why? Because it's a story. It's a story that begins in the depths, and it rises out in which, and the story in the middle of which he discovers not only the despair of his own sin and the hopelessness of his own sin, but he discovers verse four, but you can't sing half of 130.

You know, that was one of the most important lessons I ever learned as a student, that you can't sing half of 130. But with you, there is forgiveness.

Do you know what this means? You know, can you see what's happening here? He's not trying to bargain with God. Notice that. We know how we try to bargain with God. We try to win points.

We try to come to God on our own terms. We try to make up our own conditions for being right with God, and we kid ourselves on. You can't kid God on. And here is the simple gospel simply explained.

Number one, that we stand guilty before God, but number two, that there is forgiveness, but it tells us where that forgiveness is.

[31:38] The forgiveness is not because I confess. You know there are people who say confession is good for the soul? Don't ever listen to that. That's a piece of nonsense. Certainly not when it comes to God.

Confession has nothing in itself. Confession is only good when we confess to the right person.

The person who can and who has authority to forgive us. And here we are told, please look at verse four, but with you there is forgiveness.

Now, let me just spend two or three minutes, because I know the time is running out. Let me just spend two or three minutes just talking about what the Bible says about the forgiveness which God brings to us this evening.

First of all, it is real forgiveness. It's not just an idea or a wishful thought. It's not something that we make up or the way in which we treat one another. When somebody wrongs us, we say that's okay.

[32:38] That's not what forgiveness is. When we come to the Bible, when God says you are forgiven, it's not just I wish. It's not as if he's saying I wish you were forgiven or I wish you well or it's okay.

When God says you are forgiven and when the psalmist says with you there is forgiveness, listen to what this is. This is the most astounding fact in the whole Bible that God takes our sin in all their awfulness and guilt and filth and horror and he literally drives them away.

You know why? Because God has authority to remove our guilt. Remember what we said last week? Remember the great question, why is hell eternal? And the answer is only one thing.

Hell is eternal because guilt never ends. Unless God removes that guilt and the only person in the world who's able, in the universe, is able to remove our guilt is God himself.

That's why tonight forgiveness is not just an idea, it's a reality. I read with you Leviticus chapter 16. It was the greatest day of all, the greatest feast of all amongst the Israelites.

[33:53] You know why? Because it was the day of atonement in which Israel knew for sure that they were clean before God. You know how God demonstrated it? By taking two goats. One of them was put to death as a sacrifice.

The other one carried the sins of Israel. Now, of course, this was symbolic. It all looked towards the day when the real sacrifice would be made. And you know who that real sacrifice was?

Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world and who laid down his life. And who took our guilt upon himself. Why is it that the psalmist, why is this man so confident that there is, he doesn't say, I think there is, he doesn't say, I hope there is, he doesn't say there may be.

He says, but there is. This is the language of faith. Why is he so confident? Because he knows that there is a sacrifice for sin.

And that's how we can be confident tonight. Because we know that God has removed our guilt in the death of his son, Jesus Christ.

[35 : 01] That is where real forgiveness is and nowhere else there is forgiveness. Forgiveness is real. Second thing the Bible tells us about God's forgiveness is that it's unconditional.

We can't bargain. I said that before. We can't bargain with God the same way as a criminal can bargain with a judge. Plea bargaining, I think they call it. I heard a story once of a convicted criminal.

criminal. And who was visited by a queen. Must have been a long time ago. And the queen announced to him that he was to be pardoned.

But she said, in order for you to be pardoned, here is a list of conditions you are to fulfill upon your release.

And the criminal looked at her and said, Your Majesty, if your pardon is conditional, it's not pardon.

[36 : 05] The queen agreed. And she tore up the conditions. That's the forgiveness that God gives.

Unconditional forgiveness. And then thirdly and lastly, it's boundless. Forgiveness that God gives is boundless. Any kind of sin.

You say, what about the unforgivable sin? The sin that we find in Mark's gospel in chapter 3. Let's leave that one aside for the moment. And let me just say this.

That if you were in danger of committing the unforgivable sin, I doubt if you would be concerned about it. That's all I'm going to say about the unforgivable sin.

But don't let that keep you from coming to Jesus. Remember that when Jesus talked about the unforgivable sin, he never said that it could not be forgiven, but that it would not be forgiven.

[37 : 05] And the only reason a sin will not be forgiven is where there is no repentance. Always remember that when we come to talk about the unforgivable sin. And let's not get mixed up or confused about that.

God's forgiveness is boundless. That means the way you've lived a life of shame. You know, sometimes we bring, we've brought so much shame upon ourselves.

And we've lived a sham and lived in darkness for so many years. We actually begin to think that there is no hope for us.

That's not what the Bible says. Sometimes, sometimes we get to the point where we don't, we can't forgive ourselves or we feel we can't forgive ourselves. You have to be careful with that one because that can stop you from coming to God in faith.

In order for you to discover what God's forgiven us, you have to come to him as the God who invites everyone to himself. Now, not everyone will come.

[38 : 17] But he gives the invitation to all those, come to me, he says, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. All kinds of sin.

Sins that you've tried to overcome by your own strength in the past. Sins that you've fallen back into. Some of you might be backslidden as Christians.

God's forgiveness is for you just the same as it's for me when I backslide. Some of you might not even be able to conceive of how your life can be turned around.

That's the miracle of conversion. That's what Jesus said when he said, unless a man is born again. And that's what the new birth is. It's where God takes a person and totally transforms that person.

So that the person he once was is now gone. Finished. Dead. And a new person has arisen from the dead. Behold, said Paul, if any man is in Christ, he is a new creation.

[39 : 30] The old things have passed away. behold, all things have become new. That's the forgiveness that God brings to us this evening in the gospel, in Jesus Christ.

come and take that forgiveness. Come and confess your sin. But not to me. Not to the elders.

Not to your wife or your husband or any other person. We can't help you. But come to God and ask him to have mercy upon me, a sinner.

and God will answer that prayer. But yet with you there is forgiveness. Let's pray together.

Father, once again, we plead before you for your pardon, for your mercy, for your forgiveness. We give thanks, Lord, that we can lay hold this evening on the love of God in Jesus Christ.

[40 : 35] And that that's a love that we can depend on. We cannot understand why you should love us. But we depend and we lay hold upon that love by faith. And we want to live for you.

We want to be changed. We want you to do that great work of new birth in our hearts. And we want to know that forgiveness for ourselves.

To be able to say that we have been made clean through the blood of Jesus. Lord, give us that knowledge and give us that new beginning for we ask in Jesus' name.

Amen.